

## Increasing Consumer Use of the Internet for Health Information

Hesse BW, Nelson DE, Kreps GL, et al. Trust and sources of health information: the impact of the internet and its implications for health care providers: findings from the first Health Information National Trends Survey. *Arch Intern Med* 2006;165:2618–24.

### Study Overview

**Objective.** To form a population estimate of the public's use of the internet to access health information as well as to assess public trust in different sources of health information.

**Design.** Analysis of data derived from a national telephone survey.

**Setting and participants.** 6369 persons aged 18 years and older responding to the Health Information National Trends Survey conducted by the National Cancer Institute during 2002–2003. The survey sample was designed to produce population estimates for the entire United States. The response rate was 63%.

**Main outcome measures.** The primary outcome was the proportion of respondents who reported using the internet or e-mail at least once during the previous 12 months. Also assessed were respondents' rating of their level of trust in various health information sources (ie, a lot, some, a little, not at all) and their reported preferred as well as actual sources of cancer information.

**Main results.** Approximately 63% of the population reported using either the internet or e-mail. Among those who had ever used the internet, 64% reported engaging in health-related activities, including to search for information for themselves (51%) or for someone else (46%), to buy medicine or vitamins (9%), to communicate with a physician (7%), and to participate in online support groups (4%). Use of the internet for health-related activities was more common among those who were younger than 65 years, women, those who were white, and those with higher levels of education and income. Respondents had the highest degree of trust ("a lot") in information received from physicians (62%), followed by the internet (24%), television (20%), family or friends (19%), magazines (16%), newspapers (13%), and radio (10%). Multivariate analyses identified younger age, female sex, and higher educational level as significant predictors of increased trust in multiple information sources. 50% of respondents reported that their physician was the

source of first choice for health-related information regarding cancer; however, only 11% reported actually getting this information from their physician. While physicians and the internet accounted for the vast majority of preferred sources of information, the choice between these 2 depended greatly on respondent age. When asked specifically about cancer information, the majority of respondents aged 65 years or older preferred their physician over the internet (76% versus 8%), while those younger than 65 years more commonly preferred the internet over their physician (47% versus 39%). Similarly, when respondents were asked where they actually went for cancer information, the youngest age-group was much more likely than the oldest age-group to report using the internet before going to their physician (61% versus 21%).

**Conclusion.** The use of the internet as a source of health information continues to rise. Patients are still more likely to both trust and desire information from their physician; however, younger age-groups are increasingly turning to the internet as a primary information source.

### Commentary

The use of the internet as a source of health-related information will have increasingly profound effects on health care delivery, particularly as a vehicle for patients to become more informed and potentially more involved in their own care [1,2].

This study by Hesse et al provides new information regarding patient trust in information obtained from the internet compared with that provided by physicians. Although physicians were the most trusted and preferred source of information, there are 2 important qualifiers. The first qualifier is that while patients may wish to receive health-related information from their physician, the majority ultimately seek out information first on the internet because information can be accessed quickly. Second, younger age-groups who have increasingly incorporated computer use into their daily lives were more likely to prefer the internet as a primary health-related information source. This suggests that physicians will need to be aware of the type of informa-

tion available on the internet and be prepared to discuss these topics with patients.

There are some limitations to this study. The survey design relies on recall by respondents and includes all respondents who report ever using the internet, thus limiting analyses related to frequency of internet use. In addition, the survey questions on desired sources of information focused on cancer care, and the findings cannot be generalized to other chronic diseases or preventive medicine.

### **Applications for Clinical Practice**

The internet is an increasingly used source of health-related information, particularly among younger patients. While this trend has the potential to allow patients to become more

active in their care, health care systems and individual clinicians will need to consider the potential implications for clinician time (ie, increased length of office visits) and overall health care utilization (ie, increased use of tests).

*—Review by Thomas D. Sequist, MD, MPH*

### **References**

1. Berland GK, Elliot MN, Morales LM, et al. Health information on the internet: accessibility, quality, and readability in English and Spanish. *JAMA* 2001;285:2612–21.
2. Murray E, Lo B, Pollack L, et al. The impact of health information on the internet on the physician-patient relationship: patient perceptions. *Arch Intern Med* 2003;163:1727–34.

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